



VALUABLE THINGS WE DID NOT LEARN AT SCHOOL: TWO PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR EMOTIONAL REGULATION

As a therapist, I consider emotions as one of the most wonderful things on earth. Life simply cannot be understood without them. Our ability to experience them in their full complexity (while also being able to speak about them) is what distinguishes our very nature, separating us from other beings on this planet. Furthermore, emotions ignite and fuel our actions; whether they fit into the amazingly pleasant or distressingly perplexing box, emotions serve as the context (along with our thoughts) from which our doing can be understood.

I have often thought that something of such extraordinary significance should have been given more prominence at school. Most of us learned about emotions at our own pace, in the anonymity of our own experiences, without any blackboard, chalk, or teacher, often wondering what we were feeling and whether or not it was normal.

To every rule, there are exceptions. Students and professionals in the behavioral, biological, and social sciences did have lectures about the “emotional matter,” learning about the physiology behind emotions and mood, affect, and neurotransmitters, among others. Despite these exceptions, one perplexing truth still stands: the vast majority of human beings out there have not been explicitly taught anything regarding the emotional realm. Even more so, they have certainly not been taught what can be done with and about the least desirable emotions, the ones that are unpleasant and sometimes scary to feel.

Helping human beings make sense of and navigate distressing emotions is what we therapists devote our lives to. It is, however, an essential part of any

successful therapeutic process. Each client learns how to regulate their own emotions; in essence, learning how to be there for themselves.

In my quest to help others with their emotions, I had the opportunity to discover practical tools through Dialectical Behavioural Therapy that could be used independently by each client to help with their self-regulation. I want to share two of them with you.

1. On Observing, Naming, and Describing: **Mindfulness Of Emotions**

The ultimate goal for a person that suffers is to ease the intensity of their suffering. There is, however, a first and crucial step in the pursuit of that ease, which is awareness. No doctor would ever prescribe a treatment without clearly seeing and understanding that which he aims to treat. Acknowledgment and comprehension are, therefore, the basis of everything.

For emotional regulation purposes, the same formula applies, and that is where mindfulness comes in. It would take an entire article of its own to disclose what mindfulness is and what immense benefits it has for the people who decide to engage in a regular practice. Simply put, mindfulness means bringing attention or awareness to the present moment while experiencing it as it is, without judgment.

Learning to observe, describe, name, and ALLOW an emotion is, in essence, learning to be mindful of it. It is only when we truly see what is (when we are aware of it) that we can begin to do something about it.

Therefore, the next time you notice yourself experiencing a distressing emotion, here is a guide on how to approach it mindfully:

- a) First of all, acknowledge the presence of the emotion. Identify where in your body you experience it (chest, shoulders, jaw, stomach, etc.) and how. Observe, with curiosity, which bodily sensations you can notice (palpitations, tingling, heat, tension, etc.) and describe the changes you feel, as if you were narrating to yourself how they occur.

- b) Name your emotion. Refer to it in the third person, as something separate from you that you are experiencing at that moment. The emotion is just a visitor. You can sit with it; allow it to be there.

Sometimes it is helpful to picture emotions as a wave. They start slowly and grow until they reach their peak. Then, they lessen, washing up against the shore. You can use your breath as a “surfboard” to ride the crest of the wave until it diminishes and passes. Observe what is happening within you and how the intensity starts to shift as you breathe.

- c) Because emotions and thoughts are intertwined, it is beneficial to be aware of the latter as well. Notice the thoughts you have while you experience the emotion, and whether they come in the form of judgments about yourself, about others, or the emotion. After you identify the unhelpful thoughts, you may use your imagination to think of them as metaphors. Examples include a leaf swept by the water as it falls into a stream, a cloud floating in the sky, or passing by a billboard with your thought written on it. The aim here is to notice thoughts without getting hung up on them.

Unpleasant emotions, if felt intensely (like in the case of humans who struggle with emotional regulation), often result in impulsive actions. These actions might help get rid of such feelings in the short term, but they often bring detrimental consequences in the longer one. If we learn to be aware of unpleasant emotions by sitting with them and navigating through them, keeping in mind their impermanence, we will be freed from the slavery of needing to escape them in an unhealthy manner.

2. On Accepting Reality. The Paradoxical Effect of Increasing Freedom When Choosing to Embrace a Disliked Reality that Cannot Be Changed Easily: **Radical Acceptance**

Radical acceptance (Linehan, 1993) was one of my favorite discoveries when I was formally learning about DBT and emotional regulation. In essence, it speaks of willingly choosing to accept what reality has given us in a precise moment. It should not be confused with surrendering, giving up, or approving. It is rather

about acknowledging reality (namely, facts), to stop fighting what cannot be different at that moment, so that you may open the door to problem-solving and figure out what can be bettered.

Radical acceptance is a useful tool to keep in mind for when life hands us a painful event or significant difficulty that awakens one or several intense, unpleasant emotions. It is also useful when we find ourselves clinging to getting what we want and actively refusing to receive what is occurring.

Pain is an inevitable part of life. It surfaces up as we are living. People lose jobs, relationships sometimes finish, illnesses occur, and we make mistakes that can bring up self-directed guilt, shame, or frustration. So, instead of trying to live a life based on the helpless plan of avoiding the unavoidable, would it not make more sense to learn how to accept reality and experience pain without turning it into suffering? (As suffering is adding non-acceptance to pain.)

So, how can absolute acceptance be practiced?

The first thing to be attentive to is emotion. When frustration or anger arises, it is the first clue that we disagree with reality and, in a way, we are fighting it. We might resort to blaming as well, but the truth of the matter is that the pain is still there. What occurred did happen, and we still have to deal with it. After you have realized about your response of non-acceptance, try to follow these steps:

- a) Describe the facts that you are having trouble accepting. Keep the focus on what you can experience through your senses to leave out judgments and to avoid minimizing or exaggerating. Say it aloud if you can, as if you were narrating things yourself.
- b) Realities are a succession of small events that are linked together. It is helpful if you give yourself some time to see all the things that came into play in the construction of a precise moment. Allow yourself to tune in to the history of the moment. By acknowledging the events, you will see that, given what happened (not what should have or what you would have liked), the moment could not be any different from what it is.
- c) Choose a short mantra that reminds you that “the reality is what it is,” and that “given what has happened before this moment, it has come to be this

way.” Make it as personal as you can. Once, a patient of mine decided her reality-acceptance mantra would be, “Sometimes, it is like that, though.”

- d) Accept life it is with your whole body. When we are angry or in a questioning or fighting position, our muscles tend to be tense. Practice sitting in an upright position, placing the palms of your hands on your thighs facing up, in a receiving manner (sending your brain the non-verbal signal that it does not have to be on guard and that you are choosing to take in what the universe is giving you). This is an emotional regulation skill of its own. It is called “willing hands” (Linehan, 2015), but It can be combined here.
- e) Try to think of specific actions that you would see yourself doing if you had already accepted what has taken place and, then, put them into motion. Behave as you would from the position of acceptance.
- f) Allow feelings to arise. When painful things occur, it makes sense to feel sadness or grief. Notice them, name them, and breathe.
- g) Remind yourself that life is worth living, even when there is distress/pain.

From a perspective of radical acceptance, I acknowledge that I did not have the power to choose what I learned back in my school days. I also accept that the education system I grew up immersed in was designed during a decade in which emotional intelligence and mindfulness were not well known. I imagine my reality was very similar to most of your realities. After I accept things, I look ahead: Thankfully, we have a say in what knowledge we wish to acquire in our present and future. There are tenths of skills that can improve quality of life waiting to be discovered: Individual Therapy, DBT Skills Training Groups, or qualified books on emotional regulation¹ can be the doors that help get to them.

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¹ *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook* by McKay, Wood, and Brantley (2019)